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ABSTRACT

Acquired for the United States Military Academy in the early nineteenth century, the Thayer collection embraces almost every discipline and comprises some 1,000 books and 500 charts and maps. A recent restoration of these manuscripts has emphasized maintaining the integrity of the originals. Among the volumes are works by Buffon, Diderot, Johnson, Lagrange, Lalande, Laplace, Legendre, and Montesquieu. (EMH)

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THE THAYER COLLECTION

Its History, Significance And An Account Of The Restoration Project

U.S.M.A. Library Bulletin No.13

by

the Staff
Special Collections Division
U.S.M.A. Library

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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West Point, New York
United States Military Academy
1975

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Before and after restoration

THE HISTORY OF THE THAYER COLLECTION

In 1815, General Joseph G. Swift, Chief of Engineers and Superintendent, dispatched Major Sylvanus Thayer and Colonel William McRee to Europe in order to study foreign methods, tactics, and military schools, as well as to collect books and instruments for West Point. The books purchased on this trip have been gathered into what is now known as the Thayer Collection. These two young officers revealed an extraordinary sophistication in the titles they selected. Their collection, embracing almost every discipline and comprising 1,000 books and 500 charts and maps, included the comprehensive *Encyclopédie Méthodique*, the *Natural History* of Buffon, and the works of Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu and other great thinkers. The textbooks the officers acquired in France were used as the basis for the Academy's curriculum since no comparable works were published in the United States.

Thayer closely studied the curriculum of the École Polytechnique and the Artillery and Engineer School at Metz. Under his leadership, several prominent European Authors were translated into English. These translations complement the original editions in the Thayer Collection. A fine example is Captain John M. O'Connor's translation of Gay de Vernon's *Traite de fortification* used as an Academy textbook. It was largely Thayer and his library which caused Henry Adams to observe that through West Point the country had projected the first systematic study of science in the New World. In addition to being called the "father" of the Military Academy, Thayer might properly be considered the founder of engineering education in the United States. The significance of the Thayer Collection -- its influence on the USMA curriculum as well as on other engineering school library collections -- can not be overemphasized.

The West Point Thayer Papers, 1808-1872, which include transcriptions of letters and papers at West Point associated with Sylvanus Thayer, illuminate this buying trip while revealing the problems, accomplishments, and frustrations of Thayer, McRee, Swift, and their contemporaries. Swift's letter to Thayer dated March 30, 1815, regards the proper amount to be drawn from the U.S. War Dept. for books, maps, and instruments to be "6 or 8000 Dollars." Swift mentions his intention of providing a want list or catalogue to guide their selection. Warning Thayer to "keep clear of the Inquisition," Swift adds, "Col. Monroe informed me that an American Officer properly introduced, would see more and learn more than any private individual."

On 18 December 1816, McRee reported to Swift that the books had been shipped. The bound volumes did not exceed two hundred items, and eight hundred works were purchased unbound in pamphlet form in order to have them bound later. He added that "This plan has not been an economical one as to the prices. But as most of the works forming the collection contained a large number of plates on the proper arrangement of which, would depend in a great measure their preservation, & in part, their utility; we conceived the advantages to be gained fully worth the additional expense." McRee asked that the plates be placed at the end of each volume, each plate pasted on a blank sheet in order to unfold out of the book. The workmen, however, often neglected to follow the directions; and several volumes were bound in the "usual manner." An added expense was the stamping of the name of the Academy on the back of each volume. Forgetting to make a separate contract with the binder for the labor involved in this work, McRee comments "A little fair dealing in a mechanic would be treason towards the craft in Paris." Thayer and McRee procured ten to twelve copies of each textbook, one for each officer of the Corps and two for the library. Duplicate copies of the significant engineering and fortification works by Vauban, Bousmard and Belidor were purchased, particularly in later editions.

McRee informed Swift of the accounts in a letter of 8 January 1817. The bookseller gave a 12% discount from the catalogue prices for works in the regular market ("Livres de fonds") though he was "left to charge as he thought proper for such as were rare." The rare items, such as Gassendi, Le Martelière, Saint-Paul, Templehoff, and Rosch, were very expensive and were not published in Paris. They were commissioned to be imported from Berlin.

McRee admitted that they were inadequately acquainted with military books to determine their individual worth, but they decided upon their "general character" or that of the author. He explained, "we were anxious to make the collection complete of the principal works written upon these subjects that had formerly excited great interest and continued to divide opinions." He referred to works on artillery during the period of reform by Gribauvale and to disputes on tactics between Guibert, Menil, Durand, and others after the Seven Years' War "with a view to have all the evidence upon questions that concern us, and that we shall have to decide in our turn." In addition to purchasing books for the Military Academy at West Point, Thayer also made purchases for the Academy at Metz and at London. Thayer has been attributed with the universality of the Renaissance man - a quality superbly evidenced in the Thayer Collection.

RESTORATION OF THE THAYER COLLECTION

The purpose of restoration is to make worn books usable and to restore them as nearly as possible to their original condition while at the same time prolonging their lives. The major point of restoration is to preserve the physical, bibliographical, and aesthetic integrity of the entire book, especially the binding. Preserving the integrity of the book implies preservation of the original covers and spine, generally the most bibliographically revealing parts of a binding. Retaining the original endpapers, bookplates, ownership marks, and manuscript notes is also significant in maintaining the integrity of the book. Restoration does not add ornamentation when the binding had not been lettered or tooled originally.

The binding of the volumes of the Thayer Collection are distinguished by gilt lettering on the front and back covers:

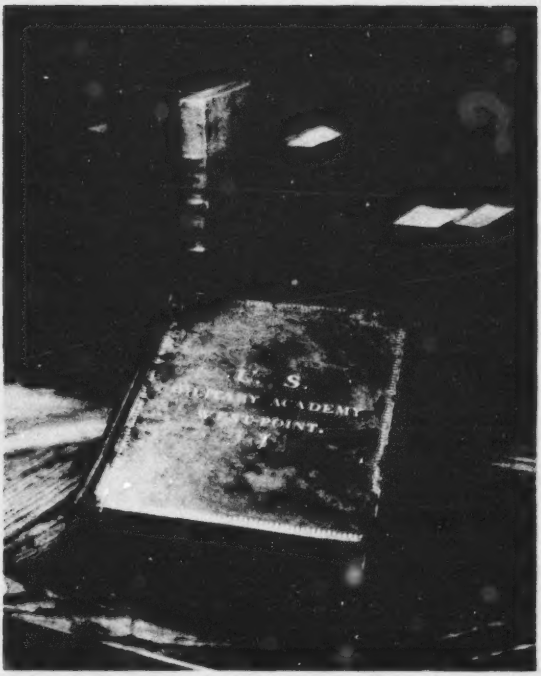
U.S.
MILITARY ACADEMY
WEST-POINT

Sylvanus Thayer directed the Kilian bookstore in Paris to add this special designation to the bindings. These original covers have been preserved and restored whenever possible. If rebinding was an absolute necessity, the new leather covers were gilt-lettered in the same fashion. The original marbled endpapers were used if their condition permitted.

Restoration of the Thayer Collection became a necessity owing to the deterioration of the leather, particularly on the spine. This was caused by temperature and humidity fluctuation, in addition to pollutants such as sulphur dioxide. Repeated usage over a hundred and fifty year span had critically affected the joints of the books; therefore, one of the most vital steps in restoration has been that of reinforcing or replacing the spine and joints. This process called "rebacking" involves a layer of new leather placed over the backbone and joints. Whenever possible, the binder has saved the original spine to replace over the new leather.

The Thayer Collection was restored by the James Macdonald firm of New York who applied their knowledge of the history of the book to their binding restoration. Using the finest leathers, cloth, and other materials, their work will greatly prolong the life and preserve the beauty of the books. The USMA Library Special Collections staff will continue the conservation of the Thayer Collection in order to maintain this expert restoration.

The restoracion of the collection began on 24 April 1972, with primary effort being given to the volumes most in need of repair. Since that date, over 355 volumes have been fully or partially restored. The total contribution toward this work has been just over $20,000, the goal of the Class of 1950 set in 1970.



THE BINDING OF THIS VOLUME, DONE
IN PARIS BY KILIAN ABOUT 1815 FOR
SYLVANUS THAYER,
HAS BEEN RESTORED BY
THE CLASS OF 1950 IN HONOR OF
THEIR DECEASED CLASSMATES

Bookplate affixed to each restored volume

6

SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS OF THE THAYER COLLECTION

Among the volumes purchased by Thayer and McRee were those of Buffon, Diderot, Johnson, Lagrange, Lalande, Laplace, Legendre, and Montesquieu. Bearing the impress of Europe's enlightened intellectual environment, these writers were the foremost representatives in their respective fields: natural history, encyclopedism, lexicography, mathematics, and political philosophy. These remarkable thinkers, together with their significant contributions, have been singled out in the following comments. Their selective works complement other landmark books acquired for the collection in the fields of military art, science, and engineering.

Buffon (1770-1788) in his *Histoire Naturelle* developed modern tidal theories relating to the origin of the solar system. In this work which won him recognition, he set out to give "an account of all the knowledge of Nature." The *Natural History* was a great popular success, as indicated by the numerous editions and translations. His rejection of a rigid system of classification and his belief in the mutability of species led the way for Darwin.

Diderot's *Encyclopédie,* noted for its treatment of science and technology as well as for its numerous descriptions and illustrations of technical processes, was enlarged, rearranged, and reissued as the *Encyclopédia Méthodique*. The work was rearranged by the publishers, Panckoucke and Agasse, as a series of separate dictionaries in large subject areas. Panckoucke's conception was remarkable, but the Revolution, which robbed him of many subscribers, was but one of the many problems he faced in his project. Nevertheless, the work constitutes a revision, and several volumes were translated into Spanish.

Samuel Johnson's (1709-1784) *Dictionary* is considered the most amazing and enduring one-man accomplishment in the field of lexicography. Noah Webster observed, "Johnson's writing had, in philology, the effect which Newton's discoveries had in mathematics." Later English dictionaries of significance may be considered a development of Johnson's *Dictionary,* which may still be consulted for instruction as well as for pleasure (See the definition for Oats: "A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people.")

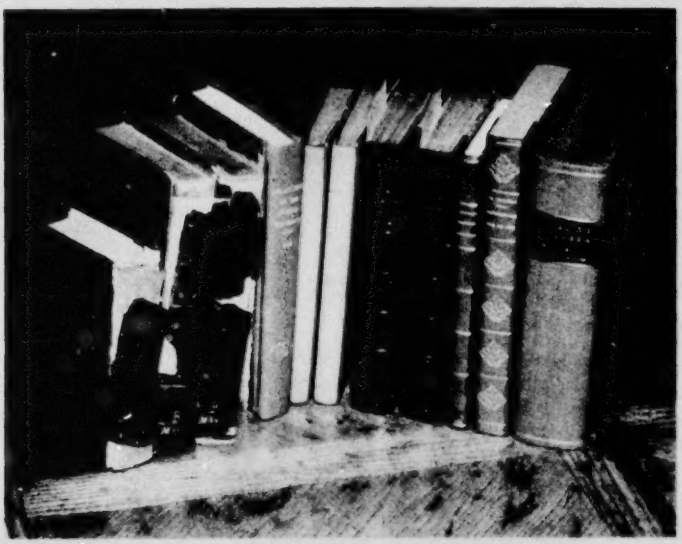
Lagrange (1736-1813), one of the greatest mathematicians of his period, wrote on almost every branch of pure and applied mathematics. His masterpiece, *Méchanique Analytique,* was a systematic development of the elements of analytical mechanics. His *Théorie des Fonctions Analytiques*, which is regarded as the starting point of the theory of functions, attempted to place the principles of calculus upon a sound foundation by relieving the mind of the difficult concept of a limit.

Lalande (1732-1807), author of one of the most comprehensive and popular books on astronomy written up to his time is represented by his *Histoire Céleste Française*. The work supplies definitive data on 50,000 stars and reflects his acute interest in unexplored scientific areas.

Laplace (1749-1827), the "Newton of France," was Professor of Mathematics at the École Militaire in Paris. Known for his *Mécanique Céleste*, which codified the work of his predecessors in dynamical astronomy, he explains in mathematical terms the interrelation of the forces acting on the components of the solar system. He considered the universe a great self-regulating machine and the solar system as continuing on its existing plan for an immense period of time. In *Système du Monde*, he was trying to account for the fact that the planets revolve around the sun in the same direction and in planes of revolution that are almost identical.

Legendre (1752-1833), Professor of Mathematics at the Military School, made important contributions in the calculus of variations. He formed a connecting link between the 18th and 19th centuries by showing how to distinguish between maxima and minima. His *Exercises de Calcul Intégral* expounds the most important mathematical functions; the *Éléments de géométrie* was translated into English in numerous editions.

Montesquieu's (1689-1755) *Oeuvres* contains one of the most remarkable treatises of the 18th century, *The Spirit of Law*, distinctive for its moderation and high plane of generalization. His theories underlie the thinking which led up to the American and French revolutions and greatly influenced the United States Constitution.



Examples of volumes needing restoration adjacent to restored bindings and protective cases.